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Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Monday, 12 October 1992, at 10 a.m.

President:	Mr. GANEV (President)	(Bulgaria)
later:	Mr. NANDOE (Vice-President)	(Suriname)
later:	Mr. GANEV (President)	(Bulgaria)

- Social development: (a) Questions relating to the world social situation and to youth, ageing, disabled persons and the family [93]

- Conclusion of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons:

  (i) Report of the Secretary-General
  (ii) Draft resolution

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The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 93

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT: (a) QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE WORLD SOCIAL SITUATION AND TO YOUTH, AGEING, DISABLED PERSONS AND THE FAMILY

CONCLUSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS DECADE OF DISABLED PERSONS:

(i) REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL (A/47/415)
(ii) DRAFT RESOLUTION (A/47/L.4)

The PRESIDENT: This morning the General Assembly, in accordance with the decision taken at its 3rd plenary meeting, is holding the first of the plenary meetings to mark the conclusion of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons, under sub-item (a) of agenda item 93.

In this connection the Assembly has before it the report (A/47/415) of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons and the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons.

The Assembly also has before it a draft resolution in document A/47/L.4, which was circulated this morning.

(The President)

The debate that begins today, at the end of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons, attests to the recognition of the importance of disability as a social development and human rights issue.

Although disability issues have always been included in the wider agenda of the United Nations, the Decade of Disabled Persons has provided an opportunity to focus special attention on them and for setting targets for world-wide efforts to deal with such issues.

Those of us gathered in this Hall today represent all sectors of society: Governments, which bear the ultimate responsibility for addressing disability issues at the national level; organizations and agencies of the United Nations, with their vast and rich experience in standard-setting and action; and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, particularly organizations of disabled people, which carry with them unique experience, expertise and wisdom.

Today we shall reflect on the achievements of the Decade, and learn from our successes, as well as from our shortcomings. This will help us to identify major trends that are emerging in disability policy and to use what the international community has accomplished over the Decade as a springboard for the development of coherent and effective strategies for the years to come.

This is a unique opportunity to exchange ideas, to share information and experiences and to forge a path for the future. It is my sincere hope that these meetings will be a landmark in the process of refining the international community's response to the challenge of disability.

I am confident that we shall emerge stronger from these meetings of the General Assembly. We shall strengthen our commitment to the objectives of the World Programme of Action by building a three-way partnership of those

(The President)

gathered here today, namely, Governments, United Nations organizations and non-governmental organizations. We shall all benefit from the experience accumulated in the promotion of the rights of disabled persons throughout the world and from the creation of a new society free from discrimination and segregation - indeed, truly a society in which all people, including those with disabilities, will live a dignified life.

I look forward to our deliberations and trust that we have the resolve to meet the challenges we have set before us and those that lie ahead.

I now call on the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: Disability issues have been a concern of the United Nations since the early days of the Organization. And that concern is rooted in the deeply humanitarian outlook of the Charter. Today, the disability programme touches the lives of millions of disabled people - and indirectly affects the lives of everyone. Today, the Assembly starts a series of special meetings to mark the conclusion of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons.

I welcome the ministers and high-ranking officials responsible for disability issues who have come for these important debates. I salute our special guests, the eminent persons. Each of them has made an outstanding contribution to the United Nations programme on disability in the last 10 years. And I extend greetings and heartfelt appreciation to the representatives of non-governmental organizations involved with the disabled.

The Charter makes no distinction between able and disabled citizens. But the words "faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the

(The Secretary-General)

human person" have a special meaning for disabled persons. The determination "to promote social progress and better standards of life" applies equally to all people.

War is a major cause of disablement. Mines are a particular danger.

So the United Nations has to work both to prevent the situations which cause war, which cause injuries and which cause disablement and to assist the victims of war and the disabled generally to play their full part in society.

The record speaks for itself. The Declaration on the Rights of the Mentally Retarded was adopted in 1971. The Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons was approved in 1975. The need to raise awareness of disability at all levels led the United Nations to proclaim the International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981.

This resulted in the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons. This is the cornerstone of the United Nations disability programme. But its objectives of full participation and equality will not be reached without broad action at the national level, supported by international cooperation. To accelerate this process the Decade of Disabled Persons was proclaimed for the period 1983-1992. We now mark the end of the Decade, but the work has just begun.

In the course of the Decade, disability issues have gone beyond the category of humanitarian concerns. They are now recognized in the dimension of human rights and development. Disability policy has moved from charity to integrated social development planning. Definitions have changed. Understanding of disability has improved. We now recognize that a disability need not be a handicap if the work place, the school, transportation and the media are accessible to disabled persons.

(The Secretary-General)

Cooperation among organizations concerned with disability is improving. Disabled persons' own organizations have grown strong in advocacy. Throughout the United Nations, agencies, bodies and programmes have set guidelines on disability policy.

(The Secretary-General)

We have tried, in this house, to implement our own policies. We have made every effort, for example, to make these meetings accessible to persons with disabilities. I am grateful for the contributions that some Member States, particularly Canada, have made to facilitate the active involvement of all participants.

The United Nations has just completed an audit of the public areas and the employment process. We intend to comply with the most advanced legislation on disability.

Early in the Decade, programmes aimed at prevention of diaability were established: immunization, nutrition, health education, vocational safety and emergency relief. By mid-Decade, the emphasis shifted to rehabilitation. With this came the "integration principle". It is within the community that people learn best to adapt to society. And the integrated approach is financially cost-effective. It is better to build structures for many than to build many structures for a few.

The last few years of the Decade brought standards for national and international conduct, along with the concept of equality. Disabled persons have the right to live in their communities the same as others live. While equal rights are the basis for equality, disabled persons must have the means of exercising those rights. This means equalization of opportunity for disabled persons, so that they may contribute fully to society.

Standard rules for the equalization of opportunity for disabled persons will be finalized in 1993. If adopted, the standard rules will serve as a measure by which States can gauge their progress in achieving equality. The future of the disability programme lies in the concept of a "society for all". The year 1992 marks a transition point. The Decade was a period of philosophical evolution. Now is the time for action.

(The Secretary-General)

(spoke in French)

The action taken in the last 10 years has been decisive. There has been increasing awareness of the rights of disabled persons, for whose benefit vast programmes of medical research, public health and social integration have been implemented, and we must not overlook their significance. The economic crisis that has hit a large part of the world has hindered some of our efforts. Often, because we do not have sufficient means, it has not been possible to achieve what was desirable.

The disabled represent a significant part of the population of our planet. Their number has been estimated at 500 million throughout the world. In the rich countries of the North they represent 12 to 14 per cent of the population; in the poor countries of the South the proportion may be as high as 20 per cent. The magnitude of these figures indicates the importance of the issue that has brought us here today.

It must be emphasized that behind these figures there are human realities; that beyond these abstract statistics, there are human realities - specific realities that are manifested daily: suffering and the struggle against sickness, poverty and marginalization. We can turn a blind eye on these realities, but our most basic duty forbids us to do so - the duty to stand in solidarity with others, but also the responsibility we owe to ourselves. There are lessons in these realities, and we should be well advised to think about those lessons.

In the courage of the disabled there are rich examples of dignity from which we can all learn. Any society that ignores the suffering of its people is condemned to fail to reach its full potential.

In the modern world, requirements of productivity, profitability and economic maximization at any cost are too often at the forefront. Too often

(The Secretary-General)

these imperatives take precedence over the search for the harmonious development of societies, for balanced development in which there is concern for each human being. To plead the cause of the disabled is to plead also the cause of a more humane world, a world intent on seeing that everyone finds his place because each person's place is useful to all. It is in this spirit that one must understand the United Nations programme for the disabled.

Similarly, just as in the case of our efforts for peace between nations, our actions to improve the living conditions of the poor, the sick and the disabled are of crucial importance, but the effectiveness of our actions does not depend just on the United Nations. The definition of priorities and the establishment of programmes presuppose coordination with action in the field by the non-governmental organizations and with the Governments of the countries involved.

In this area, as in many others, the United Nations cannot do everything by itself. It provides support and encouragement. That is why it is important that Governments themselves make the question of the disabled one of their priorities. Since this is an issue that addresses the handicapped, those who suffer and those who are alone, it will undoubtedly lead the leaders of each country to take on the most noble part of collective action.

The PRESIDENT: I thank the Secretary-General for his statement.

I should like to propose that the list of speakers in the debate be closed at 6.00 p.m. today. If I hear no objection, it will be so decided.

It was so decided.

The PRESIDENT: I therefore request those representatives wishing to participate in the debate to inscribe their names to the list of speakers as soon as possible.

(The President)

I now call on the representative of Mauritania, Mr. Mohamedou Ould Mohamed Mahmoud, who will speak on behalf of the Group of African States.

Mr. OULD MOHAMED MAHMOUD (Mauritania) (interpretation from French): I should like first to express to you, Sir, on your election as President of the General Assembly, the heartiest congratulations of the delegations of African States. Those delegations, on whose behalf I have the honour to address this important meeting devoted to the celebration at the world level of the conclusion of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons, are convinced that thanks to your political experience and other qualities today's work and the work of the forty-seventh session as a whole will lead to satisfactory results.

To your predecessor, our brother, Ambassador Samir Shihabi of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, our delegations wish to express our heartiest congratulations on the effective and able manner in which he conducted the work of the forty-sixth session of the General Assembly.

Ten years ago the General Assembly, in resolution 37/52 of 3 December 1982, adopted the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons, and in its resolution 37/53 of the same date proclaimed the period 1983-1992 as the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons. At the end of this period, which has been difficult, the time has now come to assess the action that has been taken, and to determine what progress has been achieved and what obstacles have been encountered.

The Decade's most tangible result has been a growing awareness of the problems and needs of disabled persons. Special attention is currently being given to them at all levels, and many old prejudices have now disappeared.

(Mr. Ould Mohamed Mahmoud, Mauritania)

Organizations of disabled persons, whose number has increased during the Decade, have played an important role in these developments.*

The work of the bodies and organizations of the United Nations system has also been decisive. The Voluntary Fund for the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons deserves special attention, as it has given strong support to numerous projects for those persons. However, both the Fund and other United Nations bodies have been limited by the modest means made available to the Decade. That is why the objectives identified have not been achieved, with the result that the number of disabled persons is now greater than it was 10 years ago.

The worsening of the economic and social situation in the developing countries and the crises and wars that have erupted during the same period are major reasons for this state of affairs. The African countries that have implemented structural adjustment policies and the regions that have suffered great tension are familiar with the effect of such policies and tensions on vulnerable groups in society, and disabled persons in particular. The drought and the conflicts that prevail in our continent particularly affect disabled persons, while, of course, appreciably increasing their numbers.

Consequently, the conclusion of the Decade is not, and cannot mean, the end of action for disabled persons. On the contrary, the achievements of this period must form the basis of more vigorous action, and the obstacles to our efforts must also be overcome more effectively.

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* Mr. Nandoe (Suriname), Vice-President, took the Chair.

(Mr. Ould Mohamed Mahmoud, Mauritania)

While the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons has led to a growing awareness of the situation of this vulnerable sector of the population, we must now move on to the stage of implementing practical measures that will have a real impact on their lives. The implementation of paragraphs 11 to 16 of the report of the Secretary-General (A/47/415) will certainly contribute to this immense undertaking.

There is a close link between, on the one hand, disability and infirmity, and, on the other, the level of economic and social development. Therefore, international cooperation to achieve the objectives of the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons is very important. Only effective international solidarity will make the necessary resources available to that end.

This conviction led the Organization of African Unity to set up the African Rehabilitation Institute to channel the efforts of African countries to this portion of their population.

However, both regional and international efforts must be buttressed by adequate national programmes.

Like all human beings, the disabled are entitled to protection and full respect for their dignity. They must receive any form of assistance that will enable them to play a full part in social life and to enjoy the same rights as all other human beings.

Their special position commands the attention of us all. Let us act in such a way that their appeal is heeded everywhere, and that this day devoted to them is followed by practical, generous action committing all those concerned with the rights of disabled persons to act with greater solidarity.

(Mr. Ould Mohamed Mahmoud, Mauritania)

No effort should be spared to ensure that disabled people no longer feel marginalized by their societies. At all levels - national, regional and international - we must work for this humane objective, to ensure that the rights to which I have referred are enjoyed in practice.

The PRESIDENT: I now call on the representative of Turkey, Mr. Mustafa Akşin, who will speak on behalf of the Group of Asian States.

Mr. AKŞIN (Turkey): I have the honour address the Assembly on behalf of the Asian Group on the occasion of the special plenary meeting marking the conclusion of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons and the tenth anniversary of the World Programme of Action.

The most notable achievement of the Decade has been to make the world community more sensitive to disability issues. Efforts to increase awareness of the needs of disabled persons and of the many problems they encounter have been fairly successful. However, the potential contribution of the disabled to society has not yet been fully recognized.

Many Governments in the Asian region have enacted legislation to provide services, programmes and special integration measures for disabled persons. It is important, however, to ensure that the needs and problems of the disabled are systematically taken into account in all areas, such as health, social affairs, education, employment, transportation and access to the physical environment. This is how to achieve the goal that the General Assembly has set for disabled persons - a society for all by the year 2010.

(Mr. Aksin, Turkey)

Equal opportunity for all requires equal access to education, which will not be possible if disabled students do not have the appropriate facilities, particularly adaptive devices. This also applies to employment. Consequently, we should give serious consideration to the practical aspects of the integration of disabled persons. We welcome the elaboration of standard rules on the equalization of opportunities for the disabled.

(Mr. Aksin, Turkey)

We are all aware of the relationship between disability and socio-economic problems. It is not realistic to expect the removal of all the obstacles in a relatively short time. On the other hand, we cannot afford to overlook the human resources represented by 500 million people with disabilities. For this we need effective international co-operation.

In this context, we took note with appreciation of the report of our Secretary-General on the implementation of the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons and the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons contained in document A/47/415. We welcome its recommendations.

This occasion provides us with an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to make societies fully accessible to disabled persons and to speed up the integration process. Much remains to be done to improve the situation of the disabled, and the goal of full and equal participation is far from being reached. The Asian countries are ready to contribute to international co-operation as well as the work of the United Nations in this field and to turn growing awareness into effective action.

We would like to pay tribute to the work of national and international disabled persons' organizations for the role they play in furthering our objectives.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Canadian Government for hosting the International Meeting of Ministers Responsible for the Status of Persons with Disabilities, in Montreal on 8 and 9 October 1992. This timely initiative should provide a very useful input to our deliberations here in the General Assembly.

The PRESIDENT: I call on the Mr. Alexander Arzoumanian of Armenia, who will speak on behalf of the Eastern European States.

Mr. ARZOUMANIAN (Armenia): As we close the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons, it is clear that much has been accomplished yet much remains to be done. I am pleased to be speaking on behalf of the Group of Eastern European States today. We applaud the United Nations work during the Decade, and we want to emphasize that the United Nations should continue its efforts so that one day all disabled persons all over the world will be integrated, without a shred of discrimination, into society.

Our region, especially, needs to improve the ways we address the challenges posed by disabled persons. This need to improve is substantial because in addition to persons born with disabilities many of us have been hit with tragic calamities, natural and man-made, which have created massive new disabled populations. These calamities have long lasting physical, psychological, societal and economic effects, and we readily acknowledge that as individual countries we cannot address all these challenges.

In addition, the ongoing transformation of our social, economic and political systems has exacerbated the problems we face in integrating the disabled. We must develop capable structures to meet our obligations - a task that is difficult in the midst of so much change in virtually every sphere of our lives.

Therefore we enthusiastically support proposals and recommendations reported by the Secretary-General. We want to draw particular attention to our support of the continuation of the Voluntary Fund for the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons as the United Nations Fund on Disability.

As the Secretary-General has reported, "national capacity building and institutional development were the main focus of Fund-assisted activities". This is exactly the type of assistance countries in our region need.

(Mr. Arzoumanian, Armenia)

The raising of public awareness to continue improving the situation of disabled persons is critical. Therefore we are also pleased to enthusiasically support the Russian Federation's initiative and the President's proposal to designate 3 December as the International Day of Disabled Persons.

We would like to note how encouraged we are by ongoing technological advances that help the disabled. Technology has made the twentieth century unlike any other in history; achievements unthinkable in the past, such as space travel, are now taken for granted. In the coming years we should dedicate ourselves to seeing similar advantages in technology change the lives of the disabled. Already the International Labour Organization has reported that we have the technology practically to give vision to the blind and hearing to the deaf. In the work place, we know that the technology exists for the disabled to do work that no one could have believed the disabled could perform. Many view such advances as miracles, and indeed they are miracles. But we cannot be satisfied with those miracles alone. We must make sure that technological advances continue, and, perhaps more importantly, we must find ways economically to extend the benefits of technological advances beyond a few cases, to all disabled persons all over the world.

Finally, we want to emphasize the enormous value of non-governmental organizations in meeting the needs of disabled persons. Many of our countries know from experience that non-governmental organizations that deal with disabilities and society cannot be replaced. We would like publicly to thank those organizations, many of which are here in the United Nations today; to encourage them to continue and expand their activities; and to support close co-operation among these organizations, the United Nations and our countries.

The PRESIDENT: I call on Mr. Ramiro Piriz-Ballón of Uruguay, who will speak on behalf of the Latin American and Caribbean States.

Mr. PIRIZ-BALLON (Uruguay) (interpretation from Spanish): On behalf of the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, it is my honour to address this Assembly on this most important issue.

Ten years ago we celebrated the adoption of the World Programme of Action for Disabled Persons, thereby initiating the United Nations Decade for Disabled Persons.

Much progress has been made in this period. In keeping with the Programme of Action, Governments began formulating policies to achieve the full participation of the disabled in society. In many countries national committees were formed, public information campaigns were launched, and laws were adopted to help eliminate discrimination against disabled persons. Finally, the subject was defined as a social issue within the context of respect for human rights.

On the basis of this approach, as we explore the issue of the disabled, we must eschew sentimental or a false charitable tone. Prejudices are the main obstacle confronted by the disabled on a daily basis. The use of derogatory terms to describe them, difficult access to buildings such as schools and work places and means of transportation, and labour discrimination constitute factors that foster segregation and lead to the isolation of the disabled and impede their full enjoyment of human rights.

It is necessary to give the disabled the means to exercise their rights and freedoms. Laws aimed at preventing discrimination are of little use if we do not also eliminate the obstacles to their full integration into society.

(Mr. Piriz-Ballón, Uruguay)

We believe that one aspect that deserves special attention is what causes disabilities, since many of them could be prevented if the necessary measures were taken. Science is still unable to prevent certain disabilities, such as those caused by Down's syndrome or dwarfism. However, great scientific advances have made it possible easily to prevent such diseases as poliomyelitis or measles, which can cause irreversible physical damage in children. It is alarming that in the developing world we are still witnessing the ravages caused by these diseases.

Ironically, technological progress has brought with it other causes of disabilities, through pollution, damage to the environment, the use of toxic products and so on.

What is even more serious, the developing countries are also suffering from the consequences of starvation and malnutrition, which have disabled thousands of children; lack of iodine, vitamin A and iron has irreversibly affected physical and mental growth.

These are some of the causes of disabilities in the developing countries, which could be easily eradicated if the international will existed.

There are significant numbers of disabled persons in Latin America and the Caribbean, many of whom are disabled due to the causes I have mentioned earlier, others as the tragic result of armed conflicts or natural disasters. Furthermore, the foreseeable ageing of the population will in the near future lead to an increase in the number of disabled persons owing to the high incidence of disabilities in old age. At the present time, the majority of disabilities are found among children and adolescents, particularly in poor areas.

Our region is facing a period of economic hardship, and this has led to a decrease in social spending. However, according to the information provided

(Mr. Piriz-Ballón, Uruguay)

us by the Pan-American Health Organization, the number of countries involved in rehabilitation work has increased. This represents a significant improvement, since in the past, countries' rehabilitation programmes were subject to foreign financing and dealt almost exclusively with physical disabilities. At the present time, however, efforts are being made to adopt national methods of treatment that can easily be integrated into general programmes intended to cover all disabilities, including, in their planning and implementation, the disabled themselves and also the members of the communities to which they belong.

Latin American and Caribbean countries are using a community-based method of rehabilitation, which allows them to better utilize existing means and budgets and also contribute to the standard of living of the whole community.

We believe that the key to achieving our goal of equal opportunity is a joint strategy involving Governments, all United Nations agencies and, most importantly, non-governmental organizations.

International meetings, such as the meeting of experts held in Vancouver in April this year and the ministerial meeting held in Montreal these past few days, are effective contributions on the road towards full integration of disabled persons.

The conclusion of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons in no way implies that our efforts in this area are decreasing. On the contrary, in the time since the adoption of the Programme of Action, we have learned much about achievements and obstacles as we pursue our objectives.

Hence we look to the future with the hope that progress will be made both

(Mr. Piris-Ballón, Uruguay)

nationally and internationally towards "A Society for All" by the year 2010. This must be a society where the human rights of disabled persons are fully respected. This is as just as it is necessary.

The PRESIDENT: I now call on the representative of Denmark, who will speak on behalf of the Group of Western European and Other States.

Mr. HAAKONSEN (Denmark): I have the honour to speak today on behalf of the Group of Western European and Other States on the occasion of the conclusion of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons and the tenth anniversary of the World Programme.

Ten years ago, the General Assembly adopted the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons. The Programme, which was a major outcome of the International Year of Disabled Persons, outlined a global, long-term strategy to prevent disability, enhance rehabilitation and provide for full participation of persons with disabilities in social life and development.

In adopting the resolution, the General Assembly reaffirmed the rights of all human beings to equality of opportunities and living conditions.

As we commemorate the conclusion of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons, we need to assess what we have accomplished. Although there has been considerable progress in prevention and rehabilitation, the number of disabled persons has not decreased - rather the opposite. Wars, famine, malnutrition and the destruction of the balance of nature continually disable more people. The Decade and the World Programme of Action have increased the awareness and the understanding of the international community of the situation of persons with disabilities.

Disability is no longer seen merely as an individual characteristic or defect, but as a condition arising from the interaction of an individual and

(Mr. Haakonsen, Denmark)

his or her environment. A disabled person is no longer seen primarily as a patient but as a functioning citizen whose input into society and its development is important. As stated by the Secretary-General and as noted in his report, important progress has been made during the Decade. However, the essential goal remains yet to be achieved before the world we live in can become "A Society for All" - a society in which persons with disabilities are an integral part. Now is the time to put into effect the benefits of raised awareness of disability issues and to move forward to better the lives of an estimated 500 million disabled persons world wide.

The PRESIDENT: I now call on the representative of the United States of America, Mrs. Sandra Swift Parrino, Chairperson for the National Council on Disability, and representative of the host country.

Mrs. PARRINO (United States of America): On behalf of the United States, the host country for the United Nations, I am pleased to welcome my colleagues from around the world to this important event.

Today we celebrate the end of the Decade of Disabled Persons. This has been a decade of great accomplishment for people with disabilities in America. This has been a decade of liberation, a decade of empowerment. This decade will go down in the history of our nation as the period of time when people with disabilities claimed their rightful place in American society.

The enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act is America's single greatest accomplishment for people with disabilities in the decade and perhaps in the century. It is a triumph for people with disabilities, both in America and around the world, for it rings the bell of freedom for America's 43 million citizens with disabilities and it beckons to the world's half billion people with disabilities. It is a proclamation of participation and inclusion that celebrates the full citizenship of all of us with disabilities. We are joyous and proud as we relish this victory.

It is our hope that the Americans with Disabilities Act will serve as a rallying cry for people with disabilities throughout the world, in every nation. The message this law sends to people with disabilities is powerful. It says: you are first-class citizens with the right to fully participate in every aspect of society. It says: you are part of our society, not separate from our society. It says, in short: you are like everyone else.

The United States National Council on Disability developed the Americans with Disabilities Act as a response to the exclusion and discrimination faced by Americans with disabilities. We knew from our personal expriences that the existing system was not working. It was not a person's particular impairment that was causing problems for people with disabilities - whether it was

(Mrs. Parrino, United States)

blindness or deafness or mental retardation or physical disability - it was attitudes. The biggest obstacle for people with disabilities was the negative attitudes they faced in society. These attitudes were translated into discriminatory behaviour. Architectural barriers kept disabled people out of buildings. Lack of interpreters kept them from participating in programmes. Inaccessible transportation kept them from getting jobs.

As people with disabilities, family members and advocates, we began to use our democratic process of decision-making to address these problems. In 1986 the National Council issued a report to our President and Congress entitled "Toward Independence". In that report we called for the enactment of an equal opportunity statute and suggested as a name the "Americans with Disabilities Act of 1986". We stated that unnecessary barriers and discrimination had to be eliminated if people with disabilities were to have equal opportunity.

As we crafted the law, we were clear that what was needed was not a proclamation of special treatment but, rather, a proclamation of equal treatment. People with disabilites who are qualified for jobs should have an equal chance to get those jobs. Our law calls for equal access, not special access.

In 1988 we took our legislation to the Congress. With the help and support of thousands of people across our nation, we educated the public and our legislators about the pervasive discrimination encountered by people with disabilities. Our Congress considered this legislation in less than two years - a remarkable achievement - and delivered it to an eagerly awaiting President George Bush. President Bush had made it clear from the very beginning that he wanted the legislation to become the law of the land. In a

(Mrs. Parrino, United States)

historic signing ceremony on the White House lawn on 26 July 1990, in the midst of thousands of people with disabilities and their families, President Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act and proclaimed Independence Day for people with disabilities. The President said:

"... We rejoice ... proclaiming together we will not accept, we will not excuse, we will not tolerate discrimination in America .... Let the shameful wall of exclusion come tumbling down."

The Americans with Disabilities Act ensures what was ours all along, but was not recognized: the full citizenship of people with disabilities. This law recognizes that it is not the disability itself that erects the obstacles but, rather, society's closed doors. This law opens those doors and invites people with disabilities to pass through.

As we celebrate the end of the Decade of Disabled Persons, let us look to the next century, to the future, with hope and confidence. In the next decade we will focus our efforts on making the promises of the Americans with Disabilities Act become reality. As President Bush said recently, achieving the goal of equal opportunity requires the sustained cooperation of government, business and people with disabilities. By working together we will ensure that every member of our society is recognized as a full heir to the American dream.

We urge the United Nations also to think about the future. As we consider the estimated one-half billion people with disabilities on our planet, let us think of them as full-fledged citizens in each of our countries. As nations struggle with difficult political and economic problems, let them include people with disabilities in the struggle. As democratic government infrastructures are built in newly emerging nations, let

(Mrs. Parrino, United States)

those institutions include and respect the interest of people with disabilities. Do not let them be an afterthought. Learn from America's experience.

Mr. Richard Thornburgh, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations for Administration and Management, is a world-wide leader for disability rights. At an inernational disability conference in Prague in April of this year, Mr. Thornburgh noted that the way a society treats its citizens with disabilities is a valid measure of the quality of life in that society.

I urge all those here today to work diligently in the next decade for the improvement of the lives of people with disabilities and to establish equal rights for citizens with disabilities throughout the world. The United States extends a hand of partnership to every country in working towards these goals, which are outlined in the United Nations World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons. Developing and utilizing the potential of our fellow citizens will yield a richer life for all of us.

The United States National Council on Disability is planning a next step to move us closer to our global goals. In collaboration with the United Nations we will sponsor an international conference on disability, to be held in New York in October 1993, one year from now. This conference will examine the status of people with disabilities world-wide, with a particular focus on the prevention of disability, rehabilitation services and the equalization of opportunity in developing countries. The conference will lay the groundwork for the disability aspect of the United Nations world summit on social development, to be held in 1995.

I urge all of you here to join us as we work to secure equal rights for people with disabilites throughout the world. The vision of the new era that

(Mrs. Parrino, United States)

lies ahead of us is an exciting one. Let us accept the challenges with good will and meet the obstacles with determination. Together we can accomplish our goals and ensure a meaningful life for all our fellow men.

The PRESIDENT: I now call on the representative of Canada, the Honourable Mr. Robert de Cotret, Secretary of State and Minister Responsible for the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

Mr. de COTRET (Canada) (interpretation from French): I am deeply honoured to have the opportunity to address the Assembly. As I look around this Hall, I see the faces of so many men and women who have worked tirelessly to improve the quality of life for the world's more than 500 million disabled persons.

This is indeed an historic occasion - not only because of the people gathered here today but also because of why we are gathered here. We are all here because we share a sense of the importance of the social and economic needs of disabled persons. We are here because we are all committed to changing matters and to moving forward with renewed determination. Our presence signals that the concerns of disabled persons have found their way on to the world agenda.

This same commitment and common resolve were felt just two days ago in Montreal. At the invitation of the Government of Canada, ministers and senior representatives responsible for the status of disabled persons from some 75 countries came together for the first time. This was the first conference of ministers from every region of the world to focus on the needs, aspirations and concerns of disabled people. The fact that so many political leaders would come together for this purpose clearly shows the importance we all attach to the issue.*

I had the privilege of chairing the Conference of Ministers in Montreal, with the invaluable assistance of two Vice-Chairmen, Mr. Michel Gillibert of France and Mr. Gabriel Maka of Zambia. Mr. Peter Lom of Czechoslovia, Mrs. Corazon de Leon of the Philippines and Mrs. Rhona Ottolina of Venezuela were kind enough to serve as Friends of the Chairman and members of the Bureau

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* The President returned to the Chair.

(Mr. de Cotret, Canada)

of the Conference. I wish to express my personal thanks to all of them for their support and commitment. The success of our deliberations was due in no small measure to their enlightened leadership.

To all of the ministers and senior representatives who participated in the Montreal Conference, I offer my heartfelt appreciation. We had a common commitment and shared a common concern.

(spoke in English)

The Conference of Ministers was not a forum to discuss the past, but an occasion to look to the future. I want to share with you a vision for the days and years to come that was expressed there. We all agree that the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons, now coming to a close, has brought world attention to the concerns of disabled persons and their organizations. It has provided a practical framework for meaningful initiatives throughout the world. In fact, in many nations, the Decade has been the catalyst for tremendous progress. The progress that has been stimulated by the Decade should, we agree, be continued in order further to implement the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons.

There have been many exciting initiatives undertaken during the Decade. While progress is sometimes difficult to measure, it is clear that the Decade has set in motion a process of change in all regions of the world.

Most important of all, in every part of the world, people with disabilities have started to unite in organizations as advocates for their own rights and their own opportunities. The United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons, the World Programme of Action and the Long-Term Strategy have encouraged self-determination for disabled people and have provided an opportunity to develop skills, share information and generate support.

(Mr. de Cotret, Canada)

We also recognize the importance of the continuing work on the Standard Rules. They will, when adopted, contribute significantly to the quality of life of disabled persons.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, is to be highly commended for his personal dedication to the cause of people with disabilities and for his outstanding leadership in promoting the Decade of Disabled Persons and the World Programme of Action.

While we have seen much progress, a great deal remains to be done. Persons with disabilities are still the victims of stereotypes - of discriminatory attitudes that deny equality, erode independence, limit opportunity and force isolation. We must work together to change these limiting attitudes. We must foster a new awareness.

Ministers and senior representatives who met in Montreal share a common concern for increasing international awareness of the needs and the capabilities of persons with disabilities. We are committed to working with disabled persons and their organizations in order to heighten public understanding of the goals set by disabled persons themselves and the steps that must be taken to achieve them.

Together we recognize that in all that we might seek to do in support of, and in collaboration with, persons with disabilities, disabled persons themselves must have power over the decisions that directly affect their lives. Ministers must work to make possible the independence of persons with disabilities - and we will. We know that for some countries this may require new technology and resources.

But we cannot achieve this objective alone. We will work within the United Nations system. We will work with regional organizations; we will work

(Mr. de Cotret, Canada)

with business and industry and we will work with trade unions. We will work with voluntary organizations. Most important, we will work with disabled persons themselves.

By developing working partnerships, we will seek to expand activities and programmes that increase the independence of persons with disabilities and enable them to take their rightful place as full participants in their communities and in their countries. We are united in our commitment to this.

But accommodating the full participation of persons with disabilities requires more than commitment. Developing countries are experiencing increased difficulties in mobilizing adequate resources for meeting the needs of persons with disabilities. For meaningful change to occur in some regions of the world, assistance must be provided by other Governments and other agencies. Expertise in identifying practical programmes and projects must also be available, along with appropriate technology.

Persons with disabilities live in every region of the world. They are a part of every race; they are a part of every culture and every social and economic group. Disability is a global issue, and it requires a global response.

As ministers responsible for the status of persons with disabilities, we know that our commitment to these objectives will be more effective through increased collaboration among us. By working together we can build on our individual accomplishments, while pursuing common goals. By working together, we can identify priorities, we can maximize resources and we can enhance existing programmes.

(Mr. de Cotret, Canada)

As Ministers we have much to share and much to learn from one another, and we have much to share and learn from each of those present. Our dialogue must continue. We must join together to work towards this common objective.

That is why a working group of Ministers is being created, as a result of the Conference in Montreal, in order to define an ongoing mechanism that will facilitate our collaboration at the ministerial level in the months and years ahead. This mechanism, which could serve to facilitate the exchange of information among us and to make preparations for future meetings, might also play a role in encouraging financing and the transfer of technology. It is a mechanism that, again, would be well within the system of the United Nations.

This is a major step forward. For the first time Ministers from around the world who are committed to improving opportunities for persons with disabilities will have a ready means of working together. Disabled persons and their organizations will have a channel for input to decisions and input for actions at the political level. Regional organizations will have a means of sharing information with Ministers and parliamentarians working in support of persons with disabilities.

The mechanism will thus provide a framework for the development of meaningful strategies among Governments. Such strategies could support independent living, protect human rights, develop effective partnerships and promote public awareness and a commitment to change. Once created, the mechanism will promote a dialogue, not just among Ministers but also with other organizations. But such a mechanism for ministerial collaboration cannot be born overnight. It requires careful planning, practical design and suitable resources.

(Mr. de Cotret, Canada)

We certainly would welcome other Governments whose Ministers were not able to attend the Montreal Conference joining with us in a common effort. And our work will move forward. I am sure that Ministers will meet again to take stock of the progress we have made and to encourage further action. Our dialogue will not stop until persons with disabilities are full participants and are able to share equally in the opportunities and responsibilities of their communities.

Our goal is simple. It is to work towards the day when meetings such as the Conference of Ministers in Montreal, and the discussions here today, are no longer special and/or historic occasions but are instead meetings that become part of our ongoing responsibilities as leaders and as members of the human family. It is to work towards the day when the issues of concern to people with disabilities are systematically included in all of our decisions and actions. It is to work towards the day when each nation will benefit from the full contribution of every person, including those with disabilities.

That is the vision for the future. I thank all those who helped to shape it. I welcome everyone's joining with us in moving this vision to reality.

The meeting rose at 11.35 a.m.